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Confronting the Moment:
Remaking Politics Through "Ku-Klux"

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Confronting the Moment:
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Abstract

Confronting the Moment:
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White supremacist rhetoric has long been part of the American political tradition. However, not all white supremacist movements have adopted the same rhetorical strategy. Though the Ku Klux Klan has traditionally been treated as a single movement that has undergone periods of resurgence, attuning to the distinct discursive practices and effects of each resurgent movement reveals how discourse can shape political development. This report argues that treating the Reconstruction-era Klan as a different movement than the Klan of the early-twentieth century offers an opportunity to study the "work" that Klan discourse can do. During Reconstruction, "Ku-Klux" did more than refer to the group that invoked it. It was also a synecdoche for white paternalism, mystery, domination, secrecy, Democratic party politics, and the proper role of the federal government. "Ku-Klux" discourse served as a vehicle to preserve antebellum ideas while simultaneously shepherding in reunification. By focusing on the "work" of particular discourses, we can better understand the role of rhetoric and ideas, including white-supremacism, on the direction of American political development.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION

Around 8:45pm on August 11, 2017, about two-hundred- and fifty men wearing khakis and carrying tiki torches marched from a field on the campus of the University of Virginia where they had gathered towards a statute of Thomas Jefferson on the university's rotunda. Many of them were chanting "You will not replace us." The group of men encountered some university students at the rotunda and the scene soon became violent, though not nearly as violent as the clash between protestors and counterprotestors the next morning on the streets of Charlottesville, VA. The events of August 12 left dozens injured and three dead, including Heather Heyer, a paralegal who was killed when one of the protesting white supremacists rammed his car into the crowd where Heyer was standing. The events of August 11th and August 12th were the result of the "Unite the Right" rally—a group that included members of the so-called "alt-right," white nationalists, members of the Ku-Klux Klan, neo-Nazis, and others. The event was organized by Jason Kessler, a white supremacist who was unhappy with the city's decision to rename Lee Park and remove the statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee for whom the park was named.

The phrase "you will not replace us" chanted by the crowd of white supremacists reflects their belief that the "white race" will soon be a powerless minority or extinct altogether—replaced by an alleged ""rising tide of color."[1] Interestingly, the mob did not

[1] "White Supremacists Adopt New Slogan: 'You Will Not Replace Us,'" Anti-Defamation League, accessed August 12, 2019, https://www.adl.org/blog/white-supremacists-adopt-new-slogan-you-will-not-replace-us.

just chant, explain, or even yell "you will not replace us." Yes, they chanted it, but doing so they *declared it*. The phrase as used by this group is what philosopher of language J.L. Austin has called a "performative utterance."[2] It has no meaning until it is spoken, and its meaning is derived from the act of being spoken. The meaning of the phrase cannot be fully determined outside of the context in which it was spoken. While the men who chanted it may be hoping to not be replaced in a literal sense, they are also giving heavy credence to the "us"—the group whose political and social power they fear is slipping away. Each man individually is of course not afraid of being "replaced"—their whiteness is here to stay. Instead, they are declaring that *whiteness* will not be deconstructed or challenged. The "whiteness" they hope to preserve is not anyone's understanding of whiteness, but their own specific brand of what it means to be White in America. They are not describing a state of affairs, nor—no matter how much they might want it to *become* the case—are they saying what is the case. The meaning of "you shall not replace us," therefore, can only be understood in its context.

This is not the first time this rhetoric has been espoused in the United States. It has been a staple of white supremacists—notably the Ku Klux Klan—since at least Reconstruction. But what purpose does the rhetoric serve? The rhetoric is not simply a byproduct of the political goals of white supremacists. It serves a purpose in its own right. Seeing the patterns and deviations in the meaning of this rhetoric reveals that we should not only pay attention to what groups like the white supremacists in

[2] J. L. Austin, *Philosophical Papers*, ed. J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock, 3d ed (Oxford [Eng.] ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1979).

Charlottesville do, but also to what they say and how they say it. They are not only attempting to remake politics through violence or other action. They are also striving to remake politics through language and ideas. It does not matter that many or perhaps all of the people who use this language are unaware that their attempt at political action is two-pronged. Whether they realize it or not, they are waging a battle of rhetoric and ideas and attempting to change the grammar of politics.

Not all white supremacist movements in the United States have adopted the same rhetorical strategy. The first two iterations of the Ku Klux Klan engaged with their similar political opportunities with sharply distinct discursive strategies. This may have some bearing on whether and how successful each movement was or can be. Though the Reconstruction-era Klan was mostly eradicated by 1873, it cannot be said that it failed to achieve many of its ideational goals. It successfully reasserted antebellum white paternalism and had a lasting impact on the place of "Ku-Klux" in American political discourse. By contrast, it seems the early-twentieth century Klan was less successful at achieving its ideational goals. This is in part because it did not have many. Its goals were more material. If it had any lasting impact on American political discourse, then much of it can be attributed its appropriation of the label held by its earlier, Reconstruction-era cousin.

It is important to notice the ways politics can be successfully remade through ideas and discourse. Not all political change happens at the level of material goods or institutional outcomes, though it is more easily measured that way. The ideational or discursive shifts can be just as important. One can point to a moment of political

development more easily when it is more easily measured by a change in policy or a change in patterns of governance. It is less easily observed but no less important when political development happens on a discursive or grammatical level. Noticing how white supremacist movements have tried to remake politics through discourse gives us a better idea at how, why, or when they are able to be successful.

This paper analyzes how the first two iterations of the Ku Klux Klan engaged discursively with their respective political opportunities. Though the group that waged rampant political and racial violence throughout the South from 1866 until around 1872 shared a name with the society that formed in 1915 but fell apart by 1923, they were very different movements. Though each was of course animated by similar ideas—principally white supremacy and a hatred of Blacks—they cannot always be treated as two parts of the same movement because they did not perform ideas or engage with extant American political discourse in the same way. They reassociated ideas and patterns of language differently. I take this approach to emphasize the "work" that particular discourses can do. If we are to better understand the discursive work of the white supremacists who organized in Charlottesville in August, 2017, for example, we need to place it in its historical context and analyze how it may be successfully altering the grammar of politics in ways its material efforts cannot.

My analysis proceeds in three parts. First, I analyze the Ku Klux Klan as a social movement. Doing this reveals the importance of distinguishing between the language, ideas, or discourse of an organization and the organization itself. In fact, one recent historian of the Klan, Elaine Fritz Parsons, argues persuasively that the Reconstruction-

era Klan is better understand not as an organization but as an idea.[3] Movements engage discursively with their respective political moment differently. This can have lasting impacts on politics. Second, I analyze the Reconstruction-era Klan's discursive style in more detail and explain why it was able to hold and exercise such power. I emphasize how "Ku-Klux" was essential to the project of the Reconstruction-era Klan, but point out that no such parallel ideational project surrounded the second Klan. For the second Klan, "ku klux" was simply a referent to the group that invoked it. During Reconstruction, however, it was the other way around: The Klan *meant* Ku-Klux. Third, I bring my findings in conversation with what the literature tells us about political change. I argue a gap exists between what we know about the impact discourse can have on political change and how political scientists have understood political change. The existing literature can neither explain the differences between the first two iterations of the Klan, nor can it account for the performative project of meaning-creation of the Reconstruction-era Klan. If we have any hope of understanding why the rhetoric of the white supremacists at Charlottesville persists in American political discourse, or whether it will have any lasting impact, we must develop a more robust explanation for the impact of ideas and discourse on American political development.

[3] Elaine Frantz Parsons, *Ku Klux: The Birth of the Klan During Reconstruction.* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015).

I. SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND THE KU KLUX KLAN

Reconstruction-era racial violence did not start with the Ku-Klux Klan, nor was all racial or politically-motivated violence associated with the Klan. Yet, the Ku-Klux Klan formed among a group of bored, demobilized Confederate soldiers in Pulaski, TN in 1866 who were concerned about the future of postwar politics.[4] Some movement theorists studying the Klan assume it can be studied as a social movement.[5] To be sure, the Klan certainly qualifies as a movement under almost any definition.[6] The issue, though, is that the various iterations of the Klan did not look the same. Treating the Ku Klux Klan as a single social movement than began in 1866 and continues today means missing the ways in which each founding and re-founding of an organization calling itself the "Ku Klux Klan" was different. Though the first two iterations of the Klan were both animated by similar ideas—notably white supremacy—the fact that these two groups use the same name is not a sufficient justification for treating it as a single movement. The Reconstruction-era Klan was more of an idea, while the early-twentieth century Klan was

[4] Parsons, 31–32; David Mark Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan*, 3rd ed (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), 8–9.

[5] Rory McVeigh, *The Rise of the Ku Klux Klan: Right-Wing Movements and National Politics*, Social Movements, Protest, and Contention 32 (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 2009).

[6] Tarrow, for example, defines movements as "collective challenges by people with common purposes and solidarity in sustained interaction with elites, opponents and authorities." Sidney G. Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics*, Cambridge Studies in Comparative Politics (Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 3–4. He posits four properties: collective challenge, common purpose, solidarity, and sustained interaction. Tarrow, 4. Traugott takes a somewhat more capacious view. For Traugott, movements are defined by two criteria: positive solidarity and an antiinstitutional orientation. Mark Others point to a modern/pre-modern movement distinction. Melucci, for example, writes that contemporary movements "assume the form of solidarity networks entrusted with potent cultural meanings, and it is precisely these meanings that distinguish them so sharply from political actors and formal organizations next to them." Alberto Melucci, *Nomads of the Present: Social Movements and Individual Needs in Contemporary Society*, ed. John Keane and Paul Mier (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989), 4.

more of an organization. To see why the distinction is important, a brief detour into social movement theory is necessary.

A. Movement Theorists and the Klan

Theories of movement formation have undergone three distinct developmental periods. Classical theorists focused on collective discontent.[7] But, beginning in the 1970s, resource-mobilization theorists argued that collective grievance is largely irrelevant to movement formation. For them, the presence of sufficient resources makes ever-present grievances coalesce.[8] Other more recent theorists have focused on the availability of a contingent political context—an opportunity—that provides the necessary conditions for movement formation.[9] Both resource mobilization and political opportunity theorists deemphasize the importance of collective grievances. But the Ku Klux Klan is more complicated. Sociologist Rory McVeigh argues the dominant models do not fit right-wing movements, which tend to form among relatively privileged, resource-rich actors who are not subject to state repression.[10] The key question is "what

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[7] Herbert Blumer, "Collective Behavior," in *An Outline of the Principles of Sociology*, ed. Robert E. Park (New York, NY: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 1939); Neil J. Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior* (New York: Free Press of Glencoe, 1963); Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd* (New Brunswick, N.J: Transaction Pub, 1995).

[8] John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory," *American Journal of Sociology* 82, no. 6 (1977): 1212–41; John D. McCarthy and Mayer N. Zald, "Appendix: The Trend of Social Movements in America: Professionalization and Resource Mobilization," in *Social Movements in an Organizational Society: Collected Essays*, ed. Mayer N. Zald and John D. McCarthy (New Brunswick, U.S.A: Transaction Books, 1987), 337–91.

[9] Doug McAdam, *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency,1930-1970*, 2nd ed (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Herbert P. Kitschelt, "Political Opportunity Structures and Political Protest: Anti-Nuclear Movements in Four Democracies," *British Journal of Political Science* 16, no. 1 (1986): 57–85; Tarrow, *Power in Movement*.

[10] McVeigh, *The Rise of the Ku Klux Klan*, 35.

leads members of relatively privileged groups utilize preexisting organizational resources and to exploit preexisting political opportunities in order to restore, preserve, or expand their preexisting privileges[?]"[11]

According to McVeigh, a slight reemphasis on the classical model helps explain the rise of right-wing movements. Collective grievance can play more of a causal role in the formation of right-wing movements than it does with movements that fit other models. McVeigh's model, therefore, is a blend of the three dominant models.[12] His model assumes that "power devaluation, resulting from structural change, produces shifts in interpretive processes which, in turn, lead to activation of organizational resources and exploitation of political opportunities."[13] His "power-devaluation model," borrows from the frame-alignment theorists, who emphasized the role of collective cognitive frameworks among movement members.[14] Frame-alignment theorists argue that movements are unlikely to occur unless individuals collectively perceive that social change is possible and desirable. McVeigh argues that power devaluation on its own does not lead to right-wing activism. This is why he finds the political process model insufficient. Rather, power devaluation shifts "individuals' perceptions of their circumstances and provide opportunities to construct new interpretive frames that

[11] McVeigh, 35.
[12] McVeigh, 39.
[13] McVeigh, 39.
[14] David A. Snow et al., "Frame Alignment Processes, Micromobilization, and Movement Participation," *American Sociological Review* 51, no. 4 (August 1986): 464, https://doi.org/10.2307/2095581.

generate support for right-wing mobilization."[15] According to McVeigh, this model captures the Ku Klux Klan that formed in 1915.

But McVeigh's model raises questions that leave its generalizability in doubt. The power devaluation model correctly emphasizes the ideological or cultural moment and individuals' cognitive perception of it. McVeigh's model can be juxtaposed against the political process model by its insight into the meaning of a political opportunity. Political opportunity theorists focus on contingent political structures. McVeigh points out, though, that this does not account for the ideational dimension. McVeigh's critique implicitly suggests that a "political opportunity" means two things. First, it is the institutional, structural, or material opening that a movement can exploit. Second, an opportunity must have an ideational or cultural dimension. Political-process theorists take the first meaning but not the second. For McVeigh, the use of framing perspectives makes this application of the political process model to the Klan a mistake. The framing perspective "invites investigation into how members and leaders of social-movement organizations actively construct interpretive frames that encourages and inspire individuals to participate in collective action."[16]

It seems, then, that McVeigh's model would suggest that for a movement to form, there must be both a political opportunity in the traditional sense—an institutional or material gap that a movement can take advantage of—*and* a moment of cultural or ideational opportunity. Without the perception of the loss of political power as a result of

[15] McVeigh, *The Rise of the Ku Klux Klan*, 43.
[16] McVeigh, 43.

some societal shift, there would be no right-wing movement.[17] There is an important parallel here between this second meaning of a political opportunity and Abraham Lincoln's impact on American politics. Political Scientist David Greenstone argues that one cannot understand Lincoln's genius without noticing his linguistic and cultural project. According to Greenstone, focusing only on Lincoln's policy choices would limit one's ability to see what made Lincoln especially transformative. Rather, Greenstone focuses on Lincoln's "persuasion," his "broad gauged orientation toward politics and government."[18] In addition to making key policy choices, Lincoln was able to borrow ideas from two different strands of liberalism in American political culture—"reform" and "humanist" liberalisms. The source of Lincoln's greatness, therefore, was his cultural achievement, namely his ability to retain certain elements of each strand of liberalism while he articulated a new cultural paradigm. Importantly, however, Greenstone emphasizes that this is not necessarily an institutional or material project. Lincoln took advantage of an opportunity to alter the grammar of politics. As Carla Hess, one of Greenstone's students, writes in the introduction to *The Lincoln Persuasion*, (the book was completed by his students and then published posthumously) Greenstone believed that "if political actors were operating according to different versions of the rules, there would likely be times when some player or players must devise a means by which those different sets of rules could be reconciled or rewritten, else the polity could not

[17] Rory McVeigh and Kevin Estep, *The Politics of Losing: Trump, the Klan, and the Mainstreaming of Resentment* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2019).
[18] J. David Greenstone, *The Lincoln Persuasion: Remaking American Liberalism*, Princeton Studies in American Politics (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1993), 5.

continue."[19] The Civil War was one of those opportunities. According to Greenstone, Lincoln's genius was that he was able to "devise[] the means to change some of the rules of the game of American politics so that a single American polity could continue to exist."[20]

Greenstone's insight tells us that when studying movements, we need to pay closer attention to the moments where the grammar of politics or the rules of the game are up for grabs. Though they do not align perfectly, Greenstone's point echoes this second meaning of a political opportunity—there must be an ideational or discursive moment that allows the movement to engage on a cultural level. Crucially, this suggests that scholars interested in movements must focus on the cultural and ideational terms of those moments and study how the movement, like Lincoln, engaged with that moment and was (or was not) able to refashion those terms.[21] The problem, therefore, is that McVeigh's power-devaluation model may not as easily be applied to every iteration of the Klan. Though his model may hold to explain the existence of the Klan narrowly construed, it cannot explain the variation between the Klans that resulted from their confrontation of differing political moments or grammars at different times. Once we see that there must be *both* a political opportunity in the traditional sense and an ideational or discursive one, we must inquire into the distinct discursive or ideational practices of each movement.

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[19] Greenstone, xx.
[20] Greenstone, xx.
[21] Sarah Gaby and Neal Caren, "The Rise of Inequality: How Social Movements Shape Discursive Fields," *Mobilization: An International Quarterly* 21, no. 4 (December 2016): 413–29, https://doi.org/10.17813/1086-671X-21-4-413.

B. Klan or Klans?

Though the Klan was mostly eradicated after 1872, it was re-founded in 1915. McVeigh and Estep apply McVeigh's power-devaluation model to the Reconstruction-era Klan as well as the early-twentieth century Klan.[22] Borrowing a concept from sociologist Verta Taylor's research on the postpartum depression movement in late-twentieth century America, McVeigh and Estep describe the intervening period between the first two iterations of the Klan as one of "abeyance."[23] Most accounts treat each iteration of the Klan as part of a larger whole.[24] Intuitively, this makes sense. The first two iterations of the Klan did form at moments that were similar culturally, or ideationally.[25] The trouble, though, is that focusing on those two Klans responded very differently to their respective contexts and circumstances.

The early-twentieth century Ku Klux Klan, whose founding was inspired by the valorization of the earlier Klan in the film *Birth of a Nation,*1915, was a structured, bureaucratic organization. It made no claim to be a subversive, terrorist organization. In fact, it publicly explicitly rejected that characterization. Hiram Evans, who served as Imperial Wizard beginning in late 1922, "framed the Klan as a bastion of moral certitude

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[22] McVeigh and Estep, *The Politics of Losing*.
[23] McVeigh and Estep; Verta A. Taylor, *Rock-a-by Baby: Feminism, Self Help, and Postpartum Depression* (New York: Routledge, 1996); Verta Taylor, "Social Movement Continuity: The Women's Movement in Abeyance," *American Sociological Review* 54, no. 5 (October 1989): 761, https://doi.org/10.2307/2117752.
[24] Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*; McVeigh and Estep, *The Politics of Losing*.
[25] McVeigh and Estep, *The Politics of Losing*.

and uprightness, an organization that held itself to only the highest standards."[26] William Joseph Simmons, founder of the Klan in 1915 and Evans's predecessor as Imperial Wizard, testified before the House Committee on Rules during its investigation into the Ku Klux Klan in October, 1921. Simmons declared that he was inspired to

> establish a fraternal, patriotic, secret order for the purpose of memorializing the great heroes of our national history, inculcating and teaching practical fraternity among men, to teach and encourage a fervent, practical patriotism toward our country, and to destroy from the hearts of men the Mason and Dixon line and build thereupon a great American solidarity and a distinctive national conscience which our country sorely stands in need of.[27]

Simmons was adamant that his Klan was not a lawless, violent organization, but a civic organization designed to foster civic mindedness.

> If the Knights of the Ku-Klux Klan has been a lawless organization, as has been charged, it would not have shown the remarkable growth it has, for in the klan is as fine a body of representative citizens as there is in the United States. In each community where there is a klan will be found members from the leading citizens, men who stand at the forefront of their cities. These men would not stand for lawlessness.[28]

Simmons also denied that the Klan was animated by religious and racial intolerance: "If the klan is to secure members on an anti-Roman Catholic, anti-Jew, and anti-Negro appeal, we do not want such members, and have never secured them in this way."[29]

Motives aside, the Klan was a (somewhat) well-organized society. Headquartered at the Imperials Wizard's residence, known as the "Imperial Palace," on Peachtree Road in Atlanta, GA., the Klan took in roughly $25 million per year at its peak.[30] It did so

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[26] McVeigh and Estep, 175.
[27] U.S. Congress, House, "The Ku-Klux Klan," § Committee on Rules (1921), 69.
[28] U.S. Congress, House, 72.
[29] U.S. Congress, House, 78.
[30] McVeigh and Estep, *The Politics of Losing*, 177.

through an elaborate recruiting scheme dreamed up by professional organizers Edward Young Clarke and Elizabeth Tyler, who were hired by Simmons in 1920 after several years of declining finances and stagnant membership.[31] As a result of the new recruiting scheme, which enlisted "Kleagles" to find new members through an incentive structure that allowed Kleagles to keep part of new member initiation fees ($10), membership skyrocketed in 1921. McVeigh and Estep write that the Klan was at this point unquestionably a pyramid scheme.[32] The Klan—that had only 2,000 members during its first five years—gained 48,000 new members in three months.[33] The Klan published a newspaper, the *Imperial Night-Hawk*, and distributed it to its members. The Klan was involved in national politics too. It drew members from both parties and expected them to place Klan loyalties over partisanship.[34] Though immigration was the Klan's principal policy issue, it had opinions on a wide range of policy domains. It supported the formation of the Federal Department of Education, mostly because of its potential impact on Catholic parochial schools.[35]

The original, Reconstruction-era Klan, was entirely different. In fact, "organization" may be too strong a descriptor. While the later Klan was able to organize an enormous fourth of July gathering for Klan members outside Kokomo, Indiana that was attended by tens (or hundreds—estimates vary) of thousands of people from across the United States, the Reconstruction-era Klan was barely more than a decentralized

[31] McVeigh, *The Rise of the Ku Klux Klan*, 21.
[32] McVeigh and Estep, *The Politics of Losing*, 176.
[33] McVeigh, *The Rise of the Ku Klux Klan*, 21.
[34] McVeigh and Estep, *The Politics of Losing*, 35.
[35] McVeigh and Estep, 35.

pattern of violence using the same label. Unlike the later Klan, the Reconstruction-era Klan involved very little lateral coordination across county or state lines. It derived its power not from a vast organizational network or enormous funds, but from myth—a myth that was only relevant at a particular historical moment, namely during Reconstruction. According to historian Elaine Fritz Parsons, historians have "found no significant evidence that Ku-Klux organizations coordinated with each other beyond the level of a few adjoining counties: most dens were short-lived local groups without any meaningful organizational connections to one another."[36] At the same time, the popular texts and newspapers "sensationalized the Klan by portraying it as a vast conspiracy."[37] For this reason, Parsons argues the Reconstruction-era Klan is more of an idea than an organization.

This is a critical distinction. To be sure, the early-twentieth century Klan was very much an organization. Yet during Reconstruction, local groups attached the label "Ku-Klux" to violence they no doubt would have committed otherwise. The label indicated to victims, observers, northerners, and to the attackers themselves, that the violence was part of a broader national narrative. In Union County, South Carolina, for example, though the label "Ku Klux" was being used in the press available to its residents beginning in 1868, it was not fully embraced by attackers—or, in fact, their victims—until 1870.[38]

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[36] Parsons, *Ku Klux: The Birth of the Klan During Reconstruction.*, 203.
[37] Parsons, 203.
[38] Parsons, 276–80.

During Reconstruction, the violence itself had a meaning somewhat independent to the idea of "Ku-Klux." The violence served an immediate purpose to those committing it: the intimidation of political enemies—a meaning inextricably bound up with questions of slavery and race. So, the violence itself did of course have "pragmatic utility primarily to those who were committing and supporting it," as well as to its victims.[39] Importantly, however, the *idea* of the Ku-Klux "had practical utility at various times and in various ways to the Ku-Klux themselves, to white southerners who supported them, to a broad northern audience, to Republican partisans, and even to victims of southern racial or political violence."[40]

Two important distinctions can be drawn between the first two iterations of the Klan that suggest the extant movement models, including the power-devaluation model, fall short. First, the models cannot explain the timing of the adoption of the label "Ku-Klux." Again, adopting the label was something southern whites did on their own, and for a specific reason. They were not exercising their membership in a formal organization. They paid no membership dues and received no newsletter or invitations to social gatherings in return. Second, the models do not explain the variation in the level and style of violence between the two groups. Both groups embraced certain performative traditions, as shown by, for example, their costumes and the titles of their leaders—Imperial Wizard, Grand Goblin, Grand Cyclops, etc. However, the early-twentieth century Klan tended to publicly disavow violence, while violence was perhaps

[39] Parsons, 182.
[40] Parsons, 182.

a necessary characteristic of the groups of people who adopted the "Ku-Klux" label during Reconstruction.

Movements engage discursively with their environments.[41] Because the first and second iterations of the Klan were organized differently in different historical contexts, it should come as no shock that there are striking ideational or discursive distinctions between them.[42] Consider the performative style of the Reconstruction-era Klan. According to Parsons, what gave Ku-Klux violence (as opposed to similar violence that did not use the label) its unique power was the "rich networks of dark cultural meaning with which Ku-Klux surrounded this moment of pain and violence."[43] For those who identified with the Klan, the violence alone was insufficient. Attackers believed it was imperative that victims and those who heard about the attacks "recognize and fear them as larger than single local events."[44] The styles of Ku-Klux violence during Reconstruction was highly localized. Because, unlike with the second iteration of the Klan, the label and style was adopted by people who learned of the Klan through national newspapers rather than interpersonal networks, Ku-Klux attackers blended the styles they saw mentioned in the papers with local traditions: "A Ku-Klux was a man who decided to adopt as his own an identity he had read about in the paper."[45] This practice was layered on top of the crisis of identity that attackers believed they faced during Reconstruction.

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[41] Gaby and Caren, "The Rise of Inequality: How Social Movements Shape Discursive Fields."
[42] Linda Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK: The Ku Klux Klan of the 1920s and the American Political Tradition*, First edition (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, a division of W. W. Norton & Company, 2017).
[43] Parsons, *Ku Klux: The Birth of the Klan During Reconstruction.*, 73.
[44] Parsons, 74.
[45] Parsons, 79.

Ku-Klux saw the performative attacks as a means to reassert antebellum white paternalism. The costumes and styles they adopted were caricatures of the identities they sought to overcome. For example, Reconstruction-era Ku-Klux sometimes assumed the characteristics and identity of animals. Interestingly, however, they often chose to dress as domestic animals (cows, mules, and goats) rather than savage animals or mystical creatures.[46]

Because during this time Southerners were perceived as backwards when compared to Northerners, Ku-Klux embraced performative practices that enabled them to "push against this definition, marking themselves not as backward-looking planters but rather as modern men."[47] As Parsons explains, the costumes and traditions were embraced by Klan attackers "to define themselves and their victims as compliant within the new postslavery order."[48]

The first two iterations of the Klan were founded during times of social and economic recalibration, when protestant whites believed their power was being deconstructed. However, each organization was quite different. They responded in markedly different ways to similar economic and social situations. Though the existing models of movement formation may be able to explain the rise of the Klans themselves, they cannot explain why the Reconstruction-era Klan was couched in myth, secrecy, claims to fantastical feats and underground networks, while the Second Klan was a

[46] Parsons, 84.
[47] Parsons, 78.
[48] Parsons, 78.

public, tightly-organized political organization that publicly disavowed racial violence (though, of course, privately condoning it). Attuning to the particular cultural moment and how each movement responded discursively and ideationally suggests that the first two iterations of the Klan cannot always be treated as two parts of a larger whole. While they used the same label and were animated by many of the same ideas, they were very different movements.

This is not to say that scholars who treat the first two iterations of the Klan as part of a larger whole are incorrect. Rather, it is that focusing on the differences reveals that much more attention needs to be paid to the particular discursive style of movements. The models themselves raise important questions about the importance of the discursive brand of each Klan (and perhaps of movements writ large). The point is that each Klan had distinct discursive styles because each confronted a unique ideational or cultural moment in American history. Studying how cultural and discursive practices are imbued with meaning can reveal how those practices can operate as causal variables.[49] It is therefore necessary to ask what relevance the disparate cultural and discursive practices of these two Klans has for our understanding of politics and political development.

[49] Lisa Wedeen, "Conceptualizing Culture: Possibilities for Political Science," *American Political Science Review* 96, no. 4 (December 2002): 713–28, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055402000400.

II. PERFORMATIVES, MEANING-CREATION, AND THE KLANS' SUCCESS

Ideas and discourse are not simply epiphenomenal of political action. To be sure, ideas and discourse are often reflective of underlying doctrines of governance. However, as Jeffrey Tulis points out, political rhetoric is also "reflective of something more fundamental. But that more fundamental phenomenon is intimately bound up with rhetoric itself; it is the idea or set of ideas that legitimates political practice."[50] So, the question becomes, what are the consequences of drawing the distinction between the first two Klans on discursive grounds? What can that tell us about the role ideas and discourse play in American politics?

Notably, we are offered an opportunity to study how successful the Reconstruction-era and early-twentieth century Klans were. However, I am less concerned with whether the Klans achieved their policy, material, or institutional goals than with their discursive or ideational goals. If the Klan successfully engaged with and reshaped the language or discourse of their time, then it was successful. If the Klan's discourse served a purpose, then it was successful. Recall that Greenstone describes Lincoln's successful reshaping of ideational strands. Political scientist Stephen Skowronek, too, describes a similar dynamic in American politics.[51] According to Skowronek, Woodrow Wilson was able to reappropriate certain patterns of racism and

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[50] Jeffrey Tulis, *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1987), 13.
[51] Stephen Skowronek, "The Reassociation of Ideas and Purposes: Racism, Liberalism, and the American Political Tradition," *American Political Science Review* 100, no. 03 (August 2006): 385–401, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055406062253.

liberalism in the American political tradition. His, too, was a successful ideational or discursive project. The Reconstruction-era Klan did something similar, but it seems the early-twentieth century Klan did not.

A. "Ku-Klux" Did Discursive Work

The Reconstruction-era Klan was engaged in a performative project. Importantly, I mean performative in two senses. First, as the last section explained, the Klan attackers took on a particular style. They wore costumes, borrowed ideas and traditions from minstrel and carnival traditions as well as from popular culture. Their attacks were typically drawn out, elaborate, and frequently involved choreographed moves like the relocation of the victim from their home before the violence began. "Performative" in this sense means theatrical or dramatic.

Second, though, the Klan was engaged in meaning-creation. Using the label "Ku-Klux" did not just mean referring to an existing organization. Being a Ku-Klux did not just signify the attacker belonged to an organization. Rather, being a Ku-Klux both carried and declared a broader meaning. Ku-Klux became a synecdoche for problems of white masculinity and domination, Democratic party politics, and the proper role of the federal government. Ku-Klux was a declaratory enterprise of meaning creation. "Performative" in this sense is the way J.L. Austin used it.[52] This second meaning concerns me here.

[52] Austin, *Philosophical Papers*.

J.L. Austin spoke of language as an activity. Pointing out that certain phrases are not referential but an act themselves, Austin posited a theory of "performative utterances."[53] A typical example is promising. When someone says, "I promise," they are not referring to our state of mind or an ongoing activity. Rather, they are *performing* the act of promising. Although, as Austin later acknowledged, speakers are not always performing the action named in their speech. They are, though, always performing *an* action.[54] Determining the meaning of that action requires engaging in a language game.[55] The performative aspects of language, therefore, have consequences for how we can understand political speech and action. It brings to the fore the "work" that a particular discourse can do: "how the use of words, the understanding of abstract concepts, and the enactment of everyday practices produce specific logics and generate observable political effects."[56] By invoking the concept of "performatives," therefore, we are offered a tool to study the ways in which practices or ideas can develop an independent meaning.

Discourse and ideas on their own can produce meanings independent of those offered by the people who use them. In her study of nationalism in Yemen, political scientist Lisa Wedeen observes that the meaning of everyday practices of nationalism goes beyond what it signified to those who performed them. Even in the absence of strong state institutions that typically contribute to a growth in national identity,

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[53] Austin.
[54] Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice: On the Significance of Ludwig Wittgenstein for Social and Political Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 39.
[55] Pitkin, *Wittgenstein and Justice*; Lisa Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions: Publics, Power, and Performance in Yemen*, Chicago Studies in Practices of Meaning (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, A Blackwell Paperback (Oxford: Blackwell, 1968).
[56] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, 14–15.

nationalism developed in Yemen. It developed through a series of performative practices that denoted a logic of their own. Wedeen argues that the importance of those everyday, performed practices of nationalism is not just in the meaning they held for those who practiced them. Rather, they were also important "in the ways in which they constitute the self through his or her performance as an explicitly national…person in the absence of a strong state or an institutionalized, procedural democracy."[57] Focusing narrowly on the institutional attachments or presence of democratic features misses the crucial role the discourse and practice of nationalism played in Yemen. The discourse of nationalism *did* work by creating a nationalism and democratic practices that, to the untrained eye, appear epiphenomenal to the undemocratic institutions.

Something similar happened with the Ku Klux Klan. Facing the loss of the Civil War and Reconstruction in full swing, the discourse and idea of Ku-Klux successfully constituted a resurgence of antebellum white dominance and political thought. As Parsons points out, "the idea of the Klan did two things. First, it "felt like a way for rural Democratic white southerners to move out of the Confederacy and into a new and integrated nation."[58] Second, it "served the purpose of sectional reconciliation and the construction of a shared set of political understandings between northerners and southern Democratic whites."[59] Like the practices of nationalism in Yemen, the enactment of Ku-Klux in Reconstruction America did discursive work. It is in this way that the

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[57] Wedeen, 15.
[58] Parsons, *Ku Klux: The Birth of the Klan During Reconstruction.*, 13.
[59] Parsons, 12.

Reconstruction-era Klan was successful. It successfully provided the ideational and discursive resources to confront the opportunity before it.

The specific contextual meaning of "Ku-Klux" is the key. It cannot be said that the Klan was successful—materially, institutionally, or discursively—without noting that it was the relationship between the *understanding* of the political moment by those that invoked "Ku-Klux," and the *meaning* of "Ku-Klux" itself. "Ku-Klux" had a specific logic, where "logic" denotes "how words and concepts make sense in specific contexts: their intelligibility comes from the ways in which language and institutions are embedded in a social world of iterative actions and performative practices."[60] "Ku-Klux" discourse was therefore not epiphenomenal. The dramatic and theatrical style of the political and racial violence served a purpose because it had a specific logic. The "Ku-Klux" idea served as the discursive vehicle for the transition to postwar America.

By contrast, the early-twentieth-century Klan appeared to not embody a similar discursive logic. It was not, therefore, as successful in the discursive or ideational sense. During Reconstruction, "Ku-Klux" held a meaning independent of the group that invoked it or the violence it perpetrated. By contrast, the second iteration of the Klan that was founded in 1915 held little or no parallel ideational power. "Klan" referred to only the organization of the Ku Klux Klan. I do not mean that the early-twentieth century Klan was not engaged in any project of the construction of discursive meaning. They were.[61]

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[60] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, 15.

[61] Kelly Baker, *Gospel According to the Klan: The KKK's Appeal to Protestant America, 1915-1930*, Culture America (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 2011).

The Klan in the 1920s, like other fraternal organizations, offered opportunities for male bonding.[62] The Klan offered an opportunity for men to compensate for the losses of a less gender-segregated economy.[63] However, at this time, "Ku-Klux" was merely referential—it merely referred to the Klan. By contrast, during Reconstruction "Ku-Klux" was not only referential. Rather, the meaning of "Ku-Klux" was constructed contextually. Rather than "Ku-Klux" meaning only "the Klan," it was the other way around. "Ku-Klux" did not just mean "Klan." The Klan meant "Ku-Klux." The unique meaning of "Ku-Klux" during Reconstruction, therefore, requires some elaboration.

B. The Meaning of "Ku-Klux" During Reconstruction

As Parsons explains, during Reconstruction there were two "Ku-Klux." First, there was the "embodied" Ku-Klux, which consisted of "thousands of real men on the ground inflicting real pain, injury, and death on the bodies of freedpeople and those who allied with them."[64] Second, there was the "disembodied Ku-Klux," what I refer to here as the "idea" of Ku-Klux. This was the Ku-Klux that existed in public discourse. It was "produced by thousands of individuals who each spoke, wrote, drew, and performed their distinct idea of the nature and meaning of collective white-on-black violence."[65] By contrast, "Ku-Klux" in the early-twentieth century was not performative in the Austinian sense. It took on no independent, contextual meaning.

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[62] Gordon, *The Second Coming of the KKK*, 94–95.
[63] Gordon, 94.
[64] Parsons, *Ku Klux: The Birth of the Klan During Reconstruction.*, 10.
[65] Parsons, 10.

Invoking "Ku-Klux" was not a license to participate in racial and political violence. One need not call themselves Ku-Klux to participate in collective and coordinated racial and politically-motivated violence. Yet, invoking "Ku-Klux" was an act that enabled attackers to participate in a broader national conversation on nationalism, resistance to northern authority, white paternalism, and the role of the federal government. It signified something broader and apart from the violence itself, and the real, physcial pain it caused.

The differences in the spread of the Klan during the two periods illustrate this point. Noticing the differences "alters our understanding of how and why so many white men would soon choose to call themselves Ku-Klux."[66] During Reconstruction, potential members of the Klan were seldom encouraged to participate in Ku-Klux violence because other Klansmen in nearby states or counties encouraged them to. The Klan's spread was less the result of coordinated organization or word of mouth than of national media attention to southern Ku-Klux violence.[67] Rather, national news media played a crucial role in the spread of information about the Ku Klux Klan. Racial and political violence was not Ku-Klux violence right up until the moment it was. The timing of the adoption of the "Ku-Klux" label is important. It demonstrates that its adoption held some meaning for those committing the coordinated racial and political violence. It suggests that by adopting the label "Ku-Klux," the group calling themselves the Klan was *meaning* Ku-

[66] Parsons, 68.
[67] Parsons, *Ku Klux: The Birth of the Klan During Reconstruction.*

Klux. "Ku-Klux" could not refer to them prior to their invocation. Rather, they referred to it.

It was not until over four years after the founding of the Ku Klux Klan in 1866 that whites in Union County, South Carolina adopted the label "Ku-Klux" for their own violence. This was not a product of lack of information on the Klan, as newspapers available in the county were discussing Ku-Klux violence occurring elsewhere in the South by 1868.[68] In late March, 1868, *The Daily Phoenix* of Columbia, SC. referred to the Ku Klux Klan as a "mysterious brotherhood" that is "spreading rapidly in Tennessee, North Alabama, and Kentucky."[69] In late May 1868, the same paper mocked the "Northern press" for printing reports of "what purports to be exposure of the secrets of the Ku Klux Klan."[70] Yet, Union County residents did not adopt the label "Ku-Klux" for their violence until November or December 1870.[71] Though violence that resembled Ku Klux violence in motive and coordination existed before that date, attackers, victims, and witnesses alike tended to reject the label in the interim.[72]

Why did "Ku Klux" not take hold immediately? Because the word and idea "Ku-Klux" had great power. It signified something other than just racial or political violence. It meant more than even the performative style of an attack itself. Rather, by eventually choosing to declare themselves "Ku-Klux" and embody its forms, Union Countians and

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[68] Parsons, 266.
[69] *The Daily Phoenix*, Mar. 26, 1868, p.2. Accessed August 6, 2019. https://www.newspapers.com/image/72222790/?terms=Ku%2BKlux%2BKlan.
[70] *The Daily Phoenix*, May 23, 1868, p. 2. Accessed August 6, 2019. https://www.newspapers.com/image/72224736/?terms=Ku%2BKlux%2BKlan
[71] Parsons, *Ku Klux: The Birth of the Klan During Reconstruction.*, 288.
[72] Parsons, 274–80.

others felt they were tapping into an additional resource. They were gaining power over black leaders and white Republicans they otherwise would not have.

Consequently, "Ku-Klux," held a meaning that its adopters surely did not always consciously realize. "Ku-Klux" meant a project of reassertion of white masculinity and patriarchy. Ku-Klux's costumes—often involving animal characteristics, blackface, horns, bright colors, accents, traditionally-women's clothing, and minstrel and carnival traditions—were not only to disguise the wearer's identity during attacks. While a desire to conceal their identity and frighten superstitious victims surely served as partial motivation for the disguises, it cannot explain why they were so elaborate, nor can it explain the routinized, performative, and deliberate style of attack. It is not clear that the costumes themselves terrorized freedmen any more than the prospect of impending horrific violence. Rather, Ku-Klux were performing both for an audience of northerners and for themselves. Because Ku-Klux violence occurred early in Reconstruction, Parsons argues Ku-Klux members had "everything to gain by encouraging northerners to read their attacks as theatrical rather than political or military" for fear that "real" organized violence would trigger an immediate suppression effort.[73] However, Ku-Klux also performed for themselves as a means to simultaneously parody and reassert southern masculinity and culture. Ku-Klux performance was "an expression of white southern men's disempowerment and failure as patriarchs after the war."[74] The particular style of

[73] Parsons, 77.
[74] Parsons, 77.

Ku-Klux attacks was an attempt to push against the definition of Southerners as backwards or antiquated. "Ku-Klux" was a performance of white masculinity.

Ku-Klux also came to symbolize a process of forced modernization. Ku-Klux meant modernization through performance. It symbolized a blending of southern cultural forms with northern authority. It meant reluctant white acquiescence to northern power, but only as a fierce discursive tradition was preserved. Thus, for Parsons, the Klan and the idea of Ku-Klux "took the form of white southern resistance to northern authority while serving as white southerners' contribution to a unified culture."[75]

"Ku-Klux" became a proxy for the debate over the power of the national government. The media played an essential role in the development of this aspect of the meaning of "Ku-Klux." Though the Klan is typically associated with the American South, Northerners molded its development. Were it not for popular texts and northern newspapers that described the Klan in fantastical, often mystical language, the Klan, according to Parsons, "probably would have remained just one of many contemporary local southern slicker groups."[76] This is no doubt in part due to the fascination in American political culture with conspiracy, sensationalist fiction, and demonization.[77]

Many northerners were fascinated by the performative style of the Klan, as well as by the mystery and secrecy that surrounded it. As a result, the presence of Klan violence symbolized a shortcoming of the American state. It meant an expansion of state

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[75] Parsons, 12.
[76] Parsons, 11.
[77] Michael Paul Rogin, *Ronald Reagan, the Movie: And Other Episodes in Political Demonology*, 1. paperback printing (Berkeley, Calif.: Univ. of California Press, 1988).

capacity was warranted. However, part of the Klan's success was its deliberate campaign of misinformation and secrecy.[78] Very little information exists even today on the identities of perpetrators of Klan violence. This misinformation campaign served as a successful shield against justification for a crackdown by the national government (for a time, of course). Ku-Klux's style simultaneously justified and parodied the new American state. It "mirrored much that seemed threatening about the new state: its use of violence, its allegedly highly organized and top-down structure, the often opaque and arcane nature of its decision-making process."[79] The Klan and the idea of "Ku-Klux" soon morphed into a synecdoche for the debate over the power of the postwar state. Notably, Parsons finds that when "Ku-Klux" appeared in newspaper articles between 1868 and 1872, the article was more likely than not referring to it in the context of "broader discussions of the postwar state."[80]

Both northern and southern audiences were fascinated by stories of the Klan's activities. It is no surprise, then, that the frequency of stories about the Klan in the national press exploded in 1868. At the same time, though, many of these stories either held very little or incorrect information. The Klan consistently and deliberately supplied misinformation on its activities. Secrecy and myth were essential aspects of the Ku-Klux idea. They helped the Klan itself seem like a more pervasive force than it really was and served to mask the identity of members of the Klan. In fact, what most contemporaries

[78] McVeigh and Estep, *The Politics of Losing*.
[79] Parsons, *Ku Klux: The Birth of the Klan During Reconstruction.*, 12.
[80] Parsons, 158.

claimed to know about the Klan came from the national press even though it constructed an inaccurate narrative of the Klan. Nevertheless, the idea of Ku-Klux served as a proxy for readers' ideas about southern politics. Parsons writes that the label of Ku-Klux "provided an effective means through which accounts of individual acts of the violent oppression of freedpeople could become more than anecdotes, aggregating into a systematic, and therefore potentially political issue."[81]

Stories about the Klan did not hit the national press until early 1868 but did not become frequent until mid-year. Reporters for national presses often borrowed ideas and even stories from local papers. But local papers were a victim of the misinformation campaign, or sometimes willing participants. *The Daily Phoenix* of Columbia, South Carolina wrote in late-April, 1868:

> If the Ku Klux Klan regale themselves with fresh African blood, drunk out of a radical skull, so the Loyal Leagues are said to be fond of secession blood, drunk out of a copperhead's skull. But there is one difference—the Ku Klux Klan are thought to be disembodied spirits—the spirits of the Confederate dead—who, at midnight, rise from their graves, and roam about to avenge themselves upon the authors, black and white, of the insults and injured heaped upon the land they died for. They are a terror, it is said, only to evil-doers.[82]

The next month, the same paper wrote of "…the frightful myth, the Ku Klux Klan."[83] Newspapers participated in the construction of a Ku-Klux narrative. The Ku-Klux idea was itself a project of legibility.[84] It served as an organizing category—a label that made

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[81] Parsons, 146.
[82] *The Daily Phoenix*, April 28, 1868. Accessed August 6, 2019. https://www.newspapers.com/image/72223792/?terms=Ku
[83] *The Daily Phoenix*, May 23, 1868. Accessed August 6, 2019. https://www.newspapers.com/image/72224736/?terms=Ku%2BKlux%2BKlan
[84] James C. Scott, *Seeing like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed*, Yale Agrarian Studies (New Haven [Conn.]: Yale University Press, 1998).

"instances of antifreedmen violence legible not only to the state but also to a national newspaper readership."[85] So, when the narratives of misinformation and myth constructed by the local papers wormed their way into national papers, a foundation existed that could be built upon and reified by a larger readership audience.

The first time the Ku Klux Klan appeared in the *New York Times* was January 20, 1868. The *Times* referred to the Klan as a "rebel organization."[86] Parsons explains that this characterization of the Klan—an "organization"—that connoted structure and coordination over chaos and violence stuck.[87] The Klan as described in the national press consistently emphasized its "coordination and discipline" instead of, for example, the "thuggish nature of its members" or the "savage frenzy of their violence."[88] The Klan strolled onto the pages of the national news as a fully formed organization, despite the fact that there "never was much Ku-Klux organizational infrastructure to reveal and understand."[89] Nevertheless, popular understandings of the Klan fell in line.

Though newspapers often depicted the Klan as a well-coordinated organization, they also contributed to the secrecy and myth surrounding it. The "Ku-Klux" idea in turn constructed the Klan's perceived reality. Yet despite frequent descriptions of the Klan as organized and disciplined, American readers seemed to have "remarkable difficulty" coming to a consensus about the status of the Klan.[90] As Parsons explains, despite the

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[85] Parsons, *Ku Klux: The Birth of the Klan During Reconstruction.*, 146.
[86] *New York Times*, Jan. 20, 1868, p.2. Accessed August 6, 2019. https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1868/01/20/78905860.html?pageNumber=2
[87] Parsons, *Ku Klux: The Birth of the Klan During Reconstruction.*, 147.
[88] Parsons, 148.
[89] Parsons, 155.
[90] Parsons, 181.

federal government's efforts to suppress the Klan—especially after the passage of the three Enforcement Acts in 1870 and 1871—and newspaper investigations, "the most fundamental question about the Ku-Klux—whether it existed at all—remained unsettled even in mainstream public discourse."[91] One cause of this persistent misinformation and confusion was the Klan's deliberate publicity strategy. Playing into the "Ku-Klux" idea, Klan members often published accounts of their actions or appeared in public processions, but did everything they could to keep the details of their behavior and actions a mystery. The culture of dishonesty about the character and frequency of Ku-Klux activity contributed to a sense of mystery and confusion. This combined with the tendency among newspapers sympathetic to Democratic causes to downplay the relevance or even existence of the Klan and an embrace of norms of journalistic responsibility that caused writers to state the lack of reliability of their information.

The result was that the Klan, powered by the aura surrounding what "Ku-Klux" really was, received a mythic, fantastical, and even reverent space in American political discourse. One *New York Times* correspondent referred to Ku-Klux as "a phantom of diseased imagination."[92] Parsons summarizes the role the Ku-Klux idea played in American political discourse:

> The Ku-Klux was a looming but always obscured presence in American political discourse. Americans refused either to look away from the Ku-Klux or to acknowledge with certainty that they had finally seen it. The image of the ghostly and metaphors of ghostliness were central both the Ku-Klux self-presentation and to its representation by politicians and by newspaper and other popular media.[93]

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[91] Parsons, 181.
[92] *New York Times*, Dec. 14, 1868. https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1868/12/14/79378329.pdf
[93] Parsons, *Ku Klux: The Birth of the Klan During Reconstruction.*, 206.

The meaning and weight of the of Ku-Klux idea was an essential aspect of its power. The organization's use of the label altered both the meaning of the organization and the violence it committed. Though the violence had an immediate purpose to those committing it, "Ku-Klux" violence had an additional goal: "to influence the broader society beyond their immediate victims."[94]

Through its very use or utterance, "Ku-Klux" meant much more than just the mythic and amorphous organizations that invoked it. For southern whites involved in coordinated, planned racial and political violence, the decision to adopt the identity and invoke the "Ku-Klux" label was important. Whether they wanted to or not adopting "Ku-Klux" asserted much more than a new site of violence. It also declared white southern masculinity, patriarchy, modernization, and caricatured the national state. "Ku-Klux" performed because it "enact[ed] what it name[d]."[95] It held a meaning beyond a reference to the people that used it. It did discursive work.

[94] Parsons, 187.
[95] Wedeen, *Peripheral Visions*, 16.

III. IDEAS, DISCOURSE, AND POLITICAL CHANGE

The discourse of "Ku-Klux" changed American politics. It did not directly cause a policy change, nor did it directly contribute to any formal institutional change at all. Of course, the existence of the Ku Klux Klan and its violence lead to several congressional hearings and eventually the passage of a series of Enforcement Acts in 1870 and 1871, one of which is often referred to as the "The Ku Klux Klan Act."[96] But even the abandonment of Reconstruction by both the Supreme Court and Congress had other causes, too.[97] Though the Supreme Court's creation of the state action doctrine in *The Civil Rights Cases*,[98] its subsequent gutting of the Privileges or Immunities Clause in in The *Slaughterhouse Cases*,[99] and its striking down of a key provision of the Enforcement Act of 1871 in *United States v. Harris* (often called the *Ku Klux Case*)[100] all contributed to the demise of the Reconstruction project, "Ku-Klux" cannot take all, most, or perhaps even any credit. These cases drew heavily on antebellum ideas about citizenship, which can be distinguished from "Ku-Klux," though they share some similar themes.

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[96] Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863-1877*, New American Nation Series (New York: HarperPerennial, 1988).
[97] Foner; Pamela Brandwein, *Rethinking the Judicial Settlement of Reconstruction*, Cambridge Studies on the American Constitution (Cambridge [England] ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Pamela Brandwein, "Reconstruction, Race, and Revolution," in *Race and American Political Development*, ed. Joseph E. Lowndes, Julie Novkov, and Dorian Tod Warren (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 125–54; Ronald M. Labbé and Jonathan Lurie, *The Slaughterhouse Cases: Regulation, Reconstruction, and the Fourteenth Amendment*, Abridged ed, Landmark Law Cases & American Society (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 2005).
[98] 109 U.S. 3 (1883).
[99] 83 U.S. 36 (1873).
[100] 106 U.S. 629 (1883).

More precisely, "discursive work," does not align with what political scientists have told us about political change. While scholars of political development are typically among the first to point out that ideas matter for political change, they have been slow to explain how and why they matter.[101] When ideas or discourse enter the picture, they are still treated as justifications or explanation for material and institutional political action. They still hold fast to the ontological hierarchy: idea (or its expression in discourse), actor, institution.

For example, political sociologist Pamela Brandwein in *Reconstructing Reconstruction* uncovers how individual justices' interpretations of historical events animated their jurisprudence.[102] Justice Miller's ideas about what the Civil War was really about became embedded in the Fourteenth Amendment jurisprudence through his decision in *The Slaughterhouse Cases*.[103] Brandwein studies the construction of historical meaning, so ideas play a central role. However, in Brandwein's account, without a human

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[101] Brian J. Glenn, "The Two Schools of American Political Development," *Political Studies Review* 2, no. 2 (April 1, 2004): 153–65, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-9299.2004.00005.x; Jeffrey Tulis and Nicole Mellow, *Legacies of Losing in American Politics*, Chicago Studies in American Politics (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018); John A. Dearborn, "The Political Efficacy of Ideas: Congress and the Institutional Presidency," *Unpublished Draft (Manuscript on File with Author)*, June 14, 2019; John A. Dearborn, "American Imperial Development," *The Journal of Politics* 81, no. 2 (April 2019): e44–49, https://doi.org/10.1086/702168; Rogers M. Smith, "Ideas and the Spiral of Politics: The Place of American Political Thought in American Political Development," *American Political Thought* 3, no. 1 (2014): 126–36, https://doi.org/10.1086/675651; Rogers M. Smith, "Which Comes First, the Ideas or the Institutions?," in *Rethinking Political Institutions: The Art of the State*, ed. Ian Shapiro, Stephen Skowronek, and Daniel Galvin (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2006), 91–113; Karen Orren and Stephen Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development* (Cambridge, UK ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004); George Thomas, "Political Thought and Political Development," *American Political Thought* 3, no. 1 (2014): 114–25, https://doi.org/10.1086/675655; Robert C. Lieberman, "Ideas, Institutions, and Political Order: Explaining Political Change," *American Political Science Review* 96, no. 04 (December 2002): 697–712, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055402000394.

[102] Pamela Brandwein, *Reconstructing Reconstruction: The Supreme Court and the Production of Historical Truth* (Durham [N.C.]: Duke University Press, 1999).

[103] 83 U.S. 36 (1872).

vehicle like Justice Miller, those ideas about the meaning of historical events may never have become embedded in American jurisprudence. While ideas played a central role in her account, they are still ontologically prior to actors.

Similarly, political scientist John Dearborn uncovers the role of ideas about presidential representation in the construction of the modern presidency.[104] But Dearborn too holds to the same ontological hierarchy: idea, actor, institution. Dearborn emphasizes the "ideational foundations" of institutions.[105] For Dearborn, the ideational foundations of institutions can be revealed in two ways. First, "a particular institutional *choice* made by political actors—as compared to available alternatives—shows how an idea can affect or generate an institution, even if the idea in itself is not the proximate cause of reform."[106] Second, "the reliance of an institution on an assumption is demonstrated by its *durability* in the face of doubt in its ideational foundation."[107] Dearborn shows that ideas can act as the foundation for an institution. It does so, though, through the choices of political actors who are motivated by the ideational tradition. So for Dearborn, too, the ontological hierarchy lives on.

Political scientists Berk and Galvan offer one of the most nuanced approaches to institutional change. Rather than trying to derive accounts of change from theories of order, they suggest setting aside "structuralist commitments" in favor of a reconceptualization of institutions "as not prior to, exogeneous from, or determinative of

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[104] Dearborn, "The Political Efficacy of Ideas: Congress and the Institutional Presidency."
[105] Dearborn, 6.
[106] Dearborn, 7.
[107] Dearborn, 7.

action, but as the raw materials for action…."[108] Doing so requires "rethinking institutions experientially, and…conceptualizing rules as skills."[109] It shifts toward an "experiential account of institutions," which leaves room for scholars to see and account for behavior that is not normally taken as a driver of change.[110] They call this approach "creative syncretism." They define it as "an invitation to unshackle theories of institutional change from the constraints of structuralism and the related confines of agency as an overdetermined or residual category."[111] Yet this definition, too holds fast to the same hierarchy. If ideas and discourse enter the picture at all, it through the process of institutional change.

To be sure, this is not necessarily problematic. These scholars have uncovered interesting ways that ideas have influenced political development and have developed new tools to study institutional change. Further, these definitions accord well with the dominant definition of "political development" in the literature, Orren and Skowronek's. For them, "political development" means a "durable shift in governing authority."[112] However, this approach cannot capture the discursive work of "Ku-Klux." Notably, it cannot easily capture Greenstone's description of Lincoln's restructuring of the two strands of American liberalism. Though Orren and Skowronek correctly point out that the effects of the "Lincoln persuasion" were eventually abandoned as Reconstruction

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[108] Gerald Berk and Dennis Galvan, "How People Experience and Change Institutions: A Field Guide to Creative Syncretism," *Theory and Society* 38, no. 6 (November 2009): 575, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11186-009-9095-3.
[109] Berk and Galvan, 575.
[110] Berk and Galvan, 576.
[111] Berk and Galvan, 576.
[112] Orren and Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development*.

puttered out, it cannot be said that Lincoln had no enduring discursive or ideational impact on American politics. To dismiss Greenstone's analysis as merely at the level of ideas and therefore disconnected from political development because those ideas were later abandoned is to underplay the importance of Lincoln's discursive project. Even if those ideas failed to become fully institutionalized during Reconstruction, they still did some important work in their own time. If, for social movement theorists, a "political opportunity" encapsulates both a material, institutional opening *and* a discursive or ideational one, then why do scholars of political development only focus on the former? To treat the discursive project of the Reconstruction-era Klan as merely at the level of ideas and as not contributing to political development because those ideas failed to become fully institutionalized as the federal government stamped out the Klan in the early-1870s also means ignoring the work those ideas did, especially for those who invoked them. What may have happened if "Ku-Klux" never developed and did no work? Might Reconstruction have taken a different turn?

Surely the discursive work of "Ku-Klux" is noteworthy for any understanding of political development. That the white supremacists in Charlottesville employed some of the same sentiment—an aggrieved group trying to reassert their perceived lost power through performative rhetoric—illustrates this. It is worth asking, therefore, if "you will not replace us," is a similar attempt to engage a political moment discursively. Is their language only a justification for attempted institutional change, or does it contribute to an ongoing construction of the meaning of Whiteness in the United States? Seeing the rhetoric of white supremacy in its historical context reveals that the Charlottesville

rhetoric may be more damaging than typically assumed. Dismissing it as only existing in a dark corner of American political culture means treating it as epiphenomenal—as not doing any discursive work. The remaining question, though, is whether contemporary white supremacists are more like the Klan of Reconstruction or the Klan of the early-twentieth century. It depends, as I have argued, on the contextual meaning of the discourse they espouse, and whether it is doing any independent discursive work. It may be too early to say definitively. To be sure, it is not just a question of the predominance and spread of white supremacist rhetoric. Rather, it is a question of whether that rhetoric is successfully doing work.

One irony is that the Klan's discursive project is that it often drew explicitly on the Constitution. Throughout American history, groups calling themselves the Ku Klux Klan have tended to justify their actions as a defense of American constitutional ideals.[113] While generations of Constitutional theorists would correctly point out that the Klan is incorrect to try to ground its rhetoric in the Constitution, that ultimately may not matter. Whether their rhetoric is nonsense or not, it can do discursive work. Though the Constitution also embodies ideals that most see as wholly inconsistent with everything the Klan stands for, it curiously also creates opportunities for these ideals to be undercut. The institutions it establishes interact with American political ideas in a way that prevents wholesale restructuring of the political landscape. Perhaps the the deepest irony of all is that the Constitution prevents the realization of its own most closely-held ideals.

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[113] Jared Goldstein, "The Klan's Constitution," *Alabama Civil Rights & Liberties Law Review* 9 (2018): 285–378.

CONCLUSION

More often than not, political change is slow, incremental, and layered. This in part because institutional and ideational orders are constantly in flux and often in tension.[114] But not all political change happens at the level of rules, policies, or institutions. Political change can be observed at the level of ideas and discourse as well. The trick, of course, is recognizing when ideas do not rise to the level of a "moment" of political development—or when they fail to contribute to political development—and when they do. Ideas and their expression through discourse can impact political development in two ways. First, the ideas can be institutionalized. The idea can find expression in formal rules and organizational outcomes. Patterns can be recognized. The idea can undergird and institutional transformation. Second, as I have argued here, ideas and discourse can do independent work in ways that impact political development. If an actor or group is vying for political change, whether they realize it or not, their project may be taking place on two fronts. First, they are likely vying for a policy or rule change. Second, though, they may be engaged in a project of discursive recombination. They may be attempting to change politics through language. If successful, this can have two

[114] Desmond S. King and Rogers M. Smith, "Racial Orders in American Political Development," American Political Science Review, February 2005, https://doi.org/10.1017/S0003055405051506; Orren and Skowronek, *The Search for American Political Development*; Tulis and Mellow, *Legacies of Losing in American Politics*; Stephen M. Engel, "Developmental Perspectives on Lesbian and Gay Politics: Fragmented Citizenship in a Fragmented State," *Perspectives on Politics* 13, no. 02 (June 2015): 287–311, https://doi.org/10.1017/S1537592715000043; Stephen M. Engel, *Fragmented Citizens: The Changing Landscape of Gay and Lesbian Lives* (NYU Press, 2016), http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.lib.utexas.edu/stable/j.ctt1803zdc; Lieberman, "Ideas, Institutions, and Political Order"; Stephen Skowronek and Karen Orren, "Pathways to the Present: Political Development in America," in *The Oxford Handbook of American Political Development*, ed. Richard M. Valelly, Suzanne Mettler, and Robert C. Lieberman (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2016), 27–47.

observable effects. First, it can also serve to be another idea that can find institutional expression. Second, though, it may be performative and do independent work outside of institutional expression. That is what the "Ku-Klux" idea did during Reconstruction. "Ku-Klux" served to perform and caricature antebellum white masculinity and declare the reunification process. It was a performative project of modernization.

Rather than looking exclusively at which ideas and discourses were invoked by members of the Klan, I have examined the impact of the language of "Ku-Klux" itself on American politics. This opens up new opportunities to study the impact of language, including white supremacist language, on the development of American politics. When the white supremacists in Charlottesville in August, 2017 chanted, "You will not replace us," they were attempting to engage in a process of discursive recombination. It was a performative project that declared an *us*. It had its own distinct logic and meaning. The harder question, though, is what impact that performative project had (or continues to have) on the American political landscape. It likely has impacted the meaning of whiteness—and, by extension, *non*whiteness—in America. It has helped define the terms of the what the white supremacists and their sympathizers—willing, unwilling, and the host of tacit, passive beneficiaries—perceive to be the state of politics that must be reclaimed. This may suggest the beginnings of an answer to the question "why does *this understanding* of whiteness persist in American political discourse"? Whereas "Ku-Klux" discourse during Reconstruction acted as a panacea for many southern Whites who were reluctant observers to reunification, modern white supremacists do not believe their prospects are as grim.

During Reconstruction, southern Whites had just lost a civil war and seen their vision for the future of polity crushed before their eyes. Today, white supremacists have more hope. They see a president who is sympathetic (or at the very least, not unsympathetic) to their views placing their ideas at center stage. Reconstruction-era Klansmembers used "Ku-Klux" to declare power over what little ground they had left, unwilling to cede it all to the burgeoning postwar American state. It worked. Ku-Klux ideas took up a unique post in the American political tradition, and Reconstruction ultimately failed to live up to its aims. Today, white supremacists are not defending what little ground they have left, but on a likely-successful quest for more. There is reason to believe, therefore, that white supremacist ideas today may be even more damaging to American politics than they were during Reconstruction. The work "Ku-Klux" performed during Reconstruction was to make modernization and reunification easier to stomach for southern Democrats and white supremacists. Today, it is not softening the blow of an inevitable loss, but structuring a potential win. White it may be too early to observe exactly what work the rhetoric of those at Charlottesville, the shooters at, for example, the Pittsburgh synagogue in October, 2018 and El Paso Wal-Mart in August, 2019 (among countless others) is *doing*, one thing is for sure. The rhetoric itself is an attempt to reshape the grammar of politics. It is an attempt to change politics through language and alter the trajectory of American political development.

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